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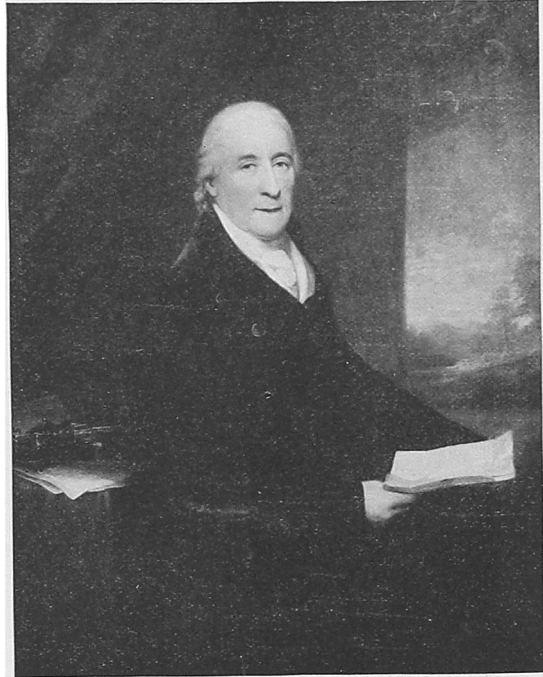
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# Portrait By Benjamin West For The Chicago Art Institute

By E. W. POWELL

THERE is no telling what discouraging influence upon the youth of the land the school-room stories of Benjamin West as an infant prodigy, may have had. It used to be the old idea that genius is born, not made, and Benjamin West's career was one proof of it. He was born in 1739 in a bleak Quaker environment, in which, even before he was sent to school, the bright flame within impelled him to pull fur out of the cat's tail and make sketches of his sleeping baby sister. Everybody saw that he was "a born artist" and began aiding him immediately—beginning with the Indians who taught him how to make the reds and the chromes they painted their bodies with, and his mother who gave him indigo for blue. When still very young, after an all-conquering success in Philadelphia and New York, he went to Rome to study, where he confessed that he was not much impressed by Michael Angelo, and where he was received in the best society, because he was supposed to be a savage and a wonder—and not because of his genius. Later he made his home in England, where he was regarded as one of the masters of the day. With Sir Joshua Reynolds he established the first Royal Academy; and he was an intimate friend of George III's under whom he began certain mural decorations, which were left unfinished when the king went mad. West died in 1820 and was buried in St. Paul's Cathedral.

The portrait bought from the Ehrich Galleries by the Friends of American Artists as a gift to the Chicago Art Institute will be a surprise to those who know him only as a painter of allegorical and historical subjects. It was painted in 1792, two years after he was made president of the Royal Academy—an extraordinary honor for an American at that time—and before he was pensioned and knighted. After that he painted no more income-producing portraits, devoting himself to his and the period's favorite story telling



## PORTRAIT

By Benjamin West

—Bought from the Ehrich Galleries, New York,  
by the Friends of American Art for The Art  
Institute, Chicago

themes. It was a time when the literary interest was of more consequence than technical merits. It is to his credit, however, that he was the first of his time to use period costumes in historic scenes. This happened in his well-known "Death of General Wolfe Before Quebec." Reynolds, we are told, expostulated when he heard that the usual Greek and Roman togas were not to be used, but when he saw the finished work he admitted that he was wrong. Today of course storytelling subjects are generally thought to have nothing to do with the merits of a painting, and West's pinnacle has not been lofty for many years. In the fine and rare portrait by him for the Chicago Art Institute, however, he is seen to rank with the best painters of the Eighteenth Century